

WEBCAMS

INTRODUCTION

In this month's *Computer Shopper* we've reviewed 12 VoIP phones that enable you to keep in touch with friends and relatives using your PC and your internet connection (see page 96). If you've got a broadband connection, though, you can go one step further. By connecting a webcam to your PC, not only can you talk to your friends, you can see them, too.

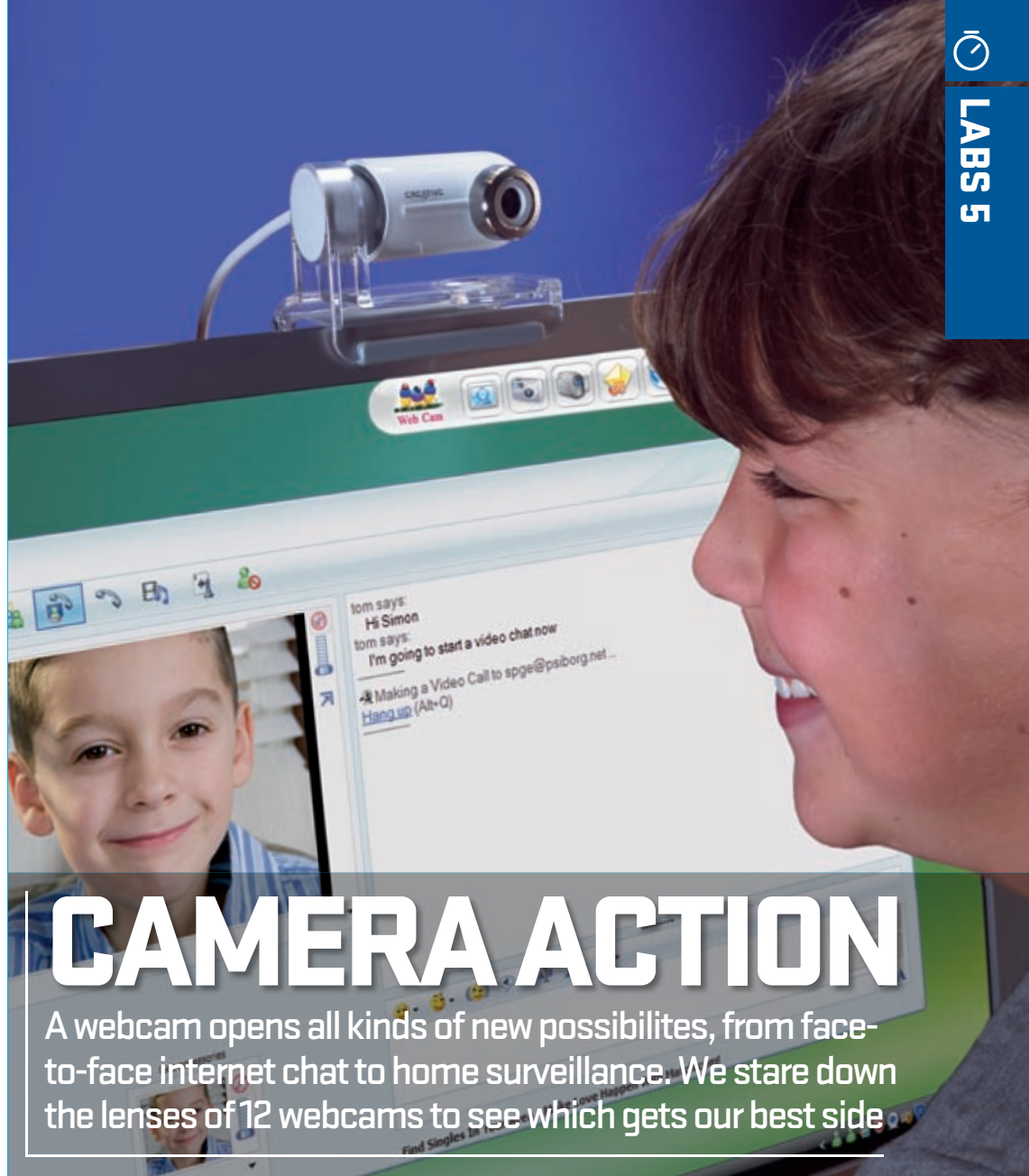
Best of all, while 3G video calls are expensive, making a video call from your PC won't cost a penny. Video messaging is available in free software utilities such as Skype and MSN Messenger, and you won't even pay for the call.

You can pick up a webcam for less than £10, but to get the best from one you'll want a camera with great image quality and useful software. This month we've reviewed 12 webcams, from inexpensive models to the top of the range. Whatever your budget, we'll help put you in the picture.

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CAMERA ACTION

A webcam opens all kinds of new possibilities, from face-to-face internet chat to home surveillance. We stare down the lenses of 12 webcams to see which gets our best side

Choosing a... Webcam

Buying a webcam should be simple: walk into your local PC retailer and buy one that you can afford. Sadly, the extremely variable quality of webcams makes this approach risky. Some webcams take great pictures and include useful software, but others produce muddy images and are tricky to use. In this guide we'll explain what to look for before you buy.

CAVEAT EMPTOR

As with digital cameras, spending more on a webcam tends to get you a model that takes higher-resolution pictures. The amount of detail an image sensor can capture is usually stated in megapixels. Digital cameras now reach the 10-megapixel mark and beyond, producing huge images of 3,648x2,736 pixels or larger. Webcams don't need to provide the same level of detail, as sending high-quality video over your internet connection would be tricky. The highest resolution here is a crisp 2 megapixels, or 1,600x1,200 pixels.

We list the resolution of each webcam in our table on page 121, but remember that a higher resolution doesn't always mean better pictures. Other factors such as colour accuracy make a big difference, so we've

noted in our reviews where webcams produced particularly good or poor images. You can also judge for yourself from the sample pictures on page 120.

THE SOFTWARE SLUMP

For most of us, the main use for a webcam is to make internet video calls. To do this you need software, such as MSN Messenger or Skype. These are free, and every webcam here works with these software packages.

If you want to do more with your webcam, such as recording video or detecting motion, you'll need special software. The software that comes with these webcams varies greatly: some have only a driver, while others bundle lots of programs. Our reviews explain which webcams include particularly good or poor software.

WHAT SOUND?

To make a video call you need a microphone and speakers as well as a webcam. One of the USB VoIP phones reviewed on page 96 would be ideal, but many webcams include a built-in microphone, a small external microphone or a headset. Our table on page 121 lists what's included with each webcam.

WEBCAMS

SWEEX Nightvision Chatcam



£9 inc VAT

Sweex's Nightvision Chatcam is mounted on a soft-jawed clip that attaches easily to an LCD or notebook monitor. The clip also acts as a stand on flat surfaces, and a sticky pad on its underside allows you to attach it permanently.

Unsurprisingly for a webcam at this price, the Sweex's sensor has a low resolution of 320x240 pixels. This wouldn't be an issue if the image quality weren't quite so poor. Images were oversaturated, blurry and lacking in detail. Worse still, the lens has a very narrow field of vision, so it's hard to stay in the picture.

The Sweex's party trick is its nightvision function. The lens is flanked by two rows of white LEDs that illuminate the picture in darkness. The results were nowhere near as good as those from MSI's StarCam CLiP, however. Even at this very low price, the Chatcam is too poor to recommend.



WEBCAM 320x240 resolution, 30fps, integrated microphone

PART CODE WC004

SUPPLIER www.rlsupplies.co.uk

DETAILS www.sweex.com

- ☒ Poor image quality
- ☒ Narrow field of vision

MSI StarCam CLiP



£15 inc VAT



MSI's webcam has a spring-loaded clip that attaches it to a notebook display. It's not wide enough to grip successfully to most LCD monitors, though, and while it stands upright on a flat surface, it doesn't take much to knock it over.

Installation was easy, and the supplied My Guard Live software offers fairly sophisticated security camera functions. You can set the amount of movement required to trigger the StarCam, which then emails a picture or uploads it to an FTP server.

Image quality from the StarCam's 640x480-pixel sensor is very impressive for the price. Colours are accurate and, despite some graininess, there's plenty of detail. The night vision mode isn't fantastic or very useful, but with three infrared LEDs it does a better job than the Nightvision Chatcam. This is an excellent webcam for the money.



WEBCAM 640x480 resolution, 30fps, integrated microphone

PART CODE S1B-0403030-S59

SUPPLIER www.ebuyer.com

DETAILS www.msi.com.tw

- ☒ Good image quality
- ☒ Poor stand

SWEEX Foldable Hi-Def 1.3M Trackcam USB 2.0



£16 inc VAT

This webcam isn't as well built as the cheaper Sweex model in this test. Its stand protects the lens when folded, but it doesn't hold the webcam very steady.

The camera is focused using an incredibly stiff ring around the lens. We had to use two hands to grapple with it.

Before we could use the Trackcam we had to download drivers for our Windows Vista PC. Oddly enough, the camera was recognised as a Vimicrocam VCO323. The supplied AmCap software comes with many of the cheaper webcams here. It lets you record huge AVI video files and JPG snapshots, but little else.

The Trackcam's name suggests that it has a 1.3 megapixel sensor, but Sweex confirmed our suspicions that it actually captures smaller 640x480 images. It may be cheap, but the Trackcam isn't good value.



WEBCAM 640x480 resolution, 30fps, integrated microphone

PART CODE WC053

SUPPLIER www.rlsupplies.co.uk

DETAILS www.sweex.com

- ☒ Reasonably accurate colours
- ☒ Images lack detail; poor stand

GENIUS Look 1320



£20 inc VAT

The Look 1320 is a genuine 1.3 megapixel webcam for just £20. Its wide base is perfect for perching on top of older CRT monitors, or simply standing on a desk. There's plenty of adjustability as it swivels around a full 360° and has a generous amount of tilt. The focus ring is easy to adjust thanks to the stable base.

Like the other Genius products here, the Look 1320 includes a bizarre and fairly pointless utility called DDPlaycam and the limited AmCap software. Installing the drivers produced a message instructing us to "Install Microsoft XML 4.0 Parser SP2", but it did so automatically and installed successfully.

Images from the 1320's 1,280x960-pixel sensor were underexposed, pixellated and rough looking, even at the highest resolution. It has reasonable colour accuracy and a keen price, but the Look 1320 is still poor value. If you want an inexpensive webcam, MSI's StarCam is cheaper and better.



WEBCAM 1,280x960 resolution, 30fps, headset microphone

PART CODE 32200182101

SUPPLIER www.tekheads.co.uk

DETAILS www.geniusnet.co.uk

- ☒ Adjustable stand
- ☒ Poor image quality

GENIUS Look 320S



£26 inc VAT

Genius's Look 320S folds away into a compact cylinder shape when you're not using it. The base pulls apart to clip to a laptop display, but it falls off fairly easily. The clip's jaws aren't wide enough to accommodate an LCD monitor, either, and the base's small area makes it liable to topple easily when on a flat surface. Thankfully, the Look 320S is a fixed-focus webcam, so you don't need to adjust it. To keep everything neat, Genius supplies a removable USB cable rather than a captive cable as used by most webcams here.

The supplied DDPlaycam software didn't work in Windows Vista, and we had to download a Vista driver to get the webcam running. The supplied AmCap software is very basic, and is useful only for taking snapshots and recording short video files. Our pictures were slightly grainy but the colours were realistic. With an impractical design and a surprisingly high price, the 320S is only middling value.



WEBCAM 640x480 resolution, 30fps, external microphone

PART CODE 32200067101

SUPPLIER www.tekcomputersuk.com

DETAILS www.geniusnet.co.uk

- ☒ Decent image quality
- ☒ Weak clip won't attach to LCD monitors

PHILIPS SPC315NC



£26 inc VAT

The Philips SPC315NC looks good, but its resolution of 320x240 is very low for the price. A fold-out stand helps the SPC315NC cling to the top of LCD and laptop monitors, but it takes up a lot of room on a desk. The focus ring tends to stick, too, which makes fine-tuning the picture difficult.

We had to download Windows Vista drivers to get the SPC315NC up and running, but as the driver file was only 3MB in size even dial-up internet users shouldn't have too much cause for complaint. The supplied Vloungue software is fairly basic. It allows you to record short video clips, take snapshots and view a slideshow of your pictures.

Considering the SPC315NC's price, the quality of the images it creates is disappointing. It uses interpolation to expand the 320x240 pixel images from its sensor up to 640x480 pixels, and the results are washed out and lacking in detail. MSI's far cheaper StarCam takes better pictures.



WEBCAM 320x240 resolution, 30fps, headset microphone

PART CODE SPC315NC/00

SUPPLIER <http://uk.insight.com>

DETAILS www.consumer.philips.com

- ☒ Good-looking design
- ☒ Poor image quality; ineffective stand

CREATIVE Live! Cam Optia

★★★★★
£30 inc VAT



Creative's new webcam adheres to the USB video device standard, so you should be able to use it without installing any drivers.

Plugging the Optia into a USB port allowed Windows Vista to recognise it and load the appropriate drivers. Sadly, Creative's auto-update function then advised us to download 35MB of crucial updates, which defeats the point of a simple driver-free installation.

Creative includes by far the most versatile software bundle here. Taking snapshots and videos is easy and there are powerful tools for sprucing up and managing your photos. You can even edit video footage into mini movies.

Images from the Optia looked a little rough around the edges and were slightly too dark until we adjusted the settings. Although image quality could be better, the Optia's great software, good looks and useful stand make it a great buy at this price.

WEBCAM 640x480 resolution, 30fps, headset microphone
PART CODE 73VF027000003
SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS www.creative.com
Great software bundle
Average image quality



GENIUS Look 313 Media

★★★★★
£30 inc VAT

The Look 313 Media is an unusual webcam with a built-in sound card and speakers. It looks like a chunky cylinder, and its lens tilts up and down, so it's not hard to get your face centred. Adjusting the focus is trickier, as the small focus ring is difficult to grip. Oddly, there's a microphone socket, but no microphone built in.

Unlike the software that comes with the other Genius products here, the copy of DDPlaycam and drivers included with the Look 313 installed with no problems under Vista. The box promises "easy surveillance functions" but these aren't particularly useful as they record to the hard disk rather than sending a picture by email or uploading captured images to an FTP site.

The Look 313 Media produced surprisingly good images, with colours that are realistic, if slightly washed out. The speakers and sound card are a little gimmicky, but this is a decent webcam that produces acceptable images.

WEBCAM 640x480 resolution, 30fps, microphone
PART CODE 32200074101
SUPPLIER www.microdirect.co.uk
DETAILS www.geniusnet.co.uk
Good image quality
Bulky



LOGITECH QuickCam for Notebooks Deluxe

★★★
£40 inc VAT

Most webcams are as happy clipped to a monitor as they are standing on a desk, but the QuickCam for Notebooks is designed to work only with notebooks. This is limiting, but the webcam clips firmly to a notebook display and can be adjusted to frame the image nicely.

No Windows Vista drivers are included, so we had to download a surprisingly large 44MB file from Logitech's website. The QuickCam software is clearly laid out and easy to use, but many of the useful or fun features included with the QuickCam Ultra Vision are absent.

Despite a 640x480-pixel sensor, the Logitech's images were disappointing. Our test shots were undersaturated, making us look rather paler than usual, and ugly pixellation obscured fine details. Despite its neat design, the QuickCam is just too expensive given its very average image quality.

WEBCAM 640x480 resolution, 30fps, integrated microphone
PART CODE 961400-0914
SUPPLIER www.comet.co.uk
DETAILS www.logitech.com
Compact design
Average image quality; expensive



MICROSOFT LifeCam VX-6000

★★★★★
£49 inc VAT

While other webcams are barely able to frame your face, the VX-6000's wide-angle lens manages to fit in a whole lot more. The versatile stand fits neatly on desks, laptops and LCD monitors alike.

Disappointingly, the drivers supplied on the CD suffer from "known compatibility issues" with Windows Vista. The software directed us to the correct download site, but new drivers weighed in at a massive 117MB. Once we'd installed it we were disappointed to find that the software was limited to taking snapshots, video clips and adding silly animations to moving images.

We had few complaints once the LifeCam was up and running, and the image quality from its 1.3 megapixel sensor was impressive. While not quite as pin-sharp and detailed as the Logitech Ultra Vision, images were still well exposed and full of fine detail. The LifeCam takes decent pictures, but it is poor value when you consider the limited software.

WEBCAM 1,280x960 resolution, integrated microphone
PART CODE 68C-00002
SUPPLIER www.dabs.com
DETAILS www.microsoft.co.uk
Wide-angle lens; good image quality
Expensive



CREATIVE Live! Cam Optia AF

★★★★★
£53 inc VAT

The Optia AF looks like Creative's cheaper webcam, but for £23 extra it adds autofocus, a 2-megapixel sensor and a built-in noise-cancelling microphone.

Windows Vista automatically installed drivers for the Optia AF, but although it worked with MSN Messenger and Skype, it wouldn't work in Creative's supplied software. Creative's auto-update fixed this by downloading a 35MB driver package. The software bundle is excellent, and the only one here to provide reasonable image- and movie-editing facilities.

The Optia AF can capture images and video at a resolution of 1,600x1,200 pixels, but the video and autofocus were a little choppy at the higher resolutions. Lowering the resolution to 1,280x960 produced smoother results. Still, images looked good, if a little over-saturated.

The Optia AF isn't cheap, but it produces great pictures and includes some excellent software. If you want a high-resolution webcam, it's the one to buy.

WEBCAM 1,600x1,200 resolution, 30fps, integrated microphone
PART CODE 73VF028000003
SUPPLIER www.scan.co.uk
DETAILS www.creative.com
Wide-angle lens; good image quality
Expensive



LOGITECH QuickCam Ultra Vision

★★★★★
£73 inc VAT

The Ultra Vision is by far the most expensive webcam in this group, and this shows in its build quality. Despite its sturdiness, though, the Logitech's flexible counterbalance is suspect. It doesn't hold the Ultra Vision firmly and balances precariously on the top of notebook displays.

After a lengthy installation process the Ultra Vision was ready. The supplied QuickCam software is well laid out and makes capturing photos and video a cinch. Logitech's RightLight technology automatically adjusts image settings according to your environment, and it worked brilliantly. The 1.3-megapixel sensor produces fantastic images, and despite a faint blue tinge to skintones it gave by far the most detailed, vibrant images of any webcam here.

The QuickCam Ultra Vision produces great pictures, but at £73 it's ludicrously expensive and its stand is annoying. If you want a high-quality webcam, save £20 and choose the Creative Optia AF.

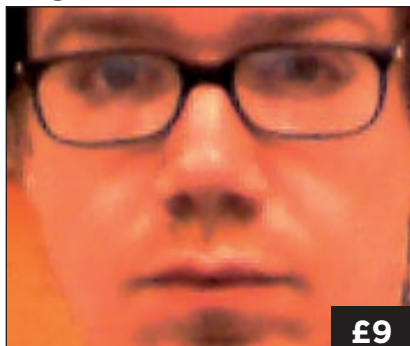
WEBCAM 1,280x960 resolution, 30fps, integrated microphone
PART CODE 961471-0510
SUPPLIER www.expansys.com
DETAILS www.logitech.com
Wide-angle lens; superb image quality
Very expensive



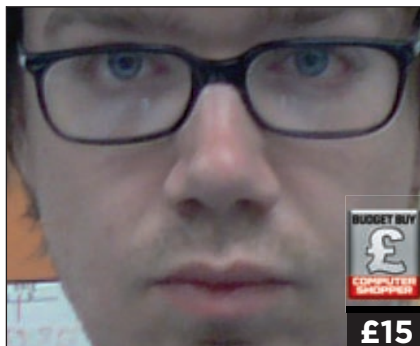
IMAGE QUALITY

Picture quality Sample images from all the webcams on test

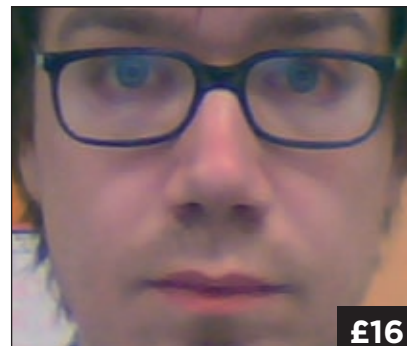
SWEEX
Nightvision Chatcam



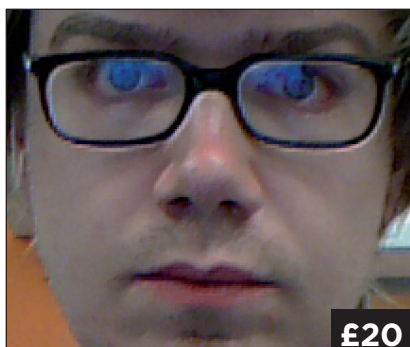
MSI
StarCam CLiP



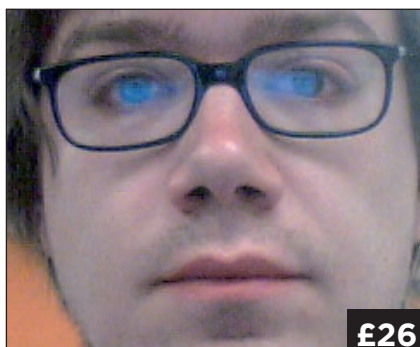
SWEEX
1.3M Trackcam



GENIUS
Look 1320



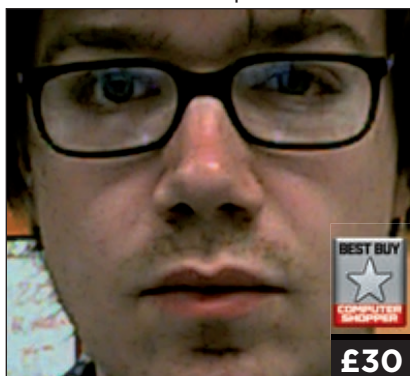
GENIUS
Look 320S



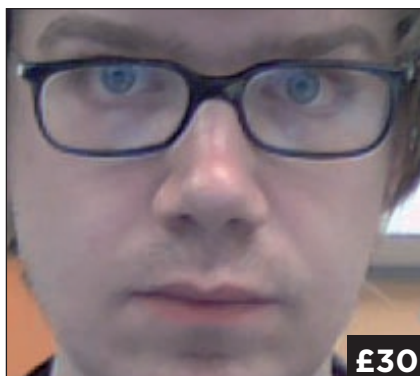
PHILIPS
SPC315NC



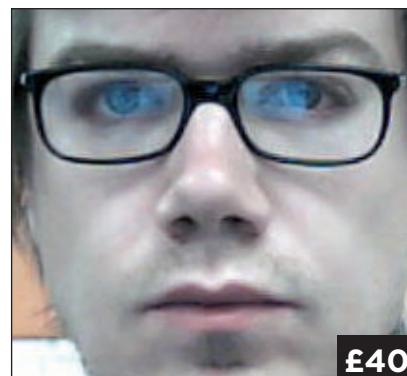
CREATIVE
Live! Cam Optia



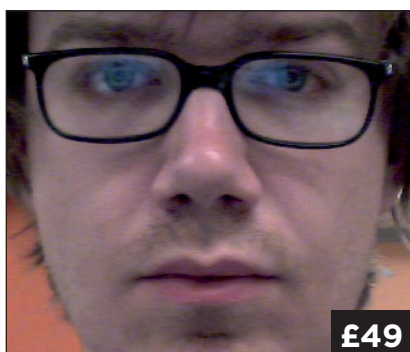
GENIUS
Look 313 Media



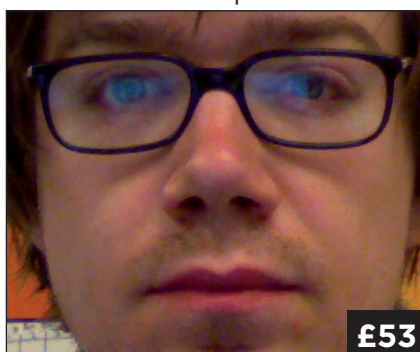
LOGITECH
QuickCam Deluxe



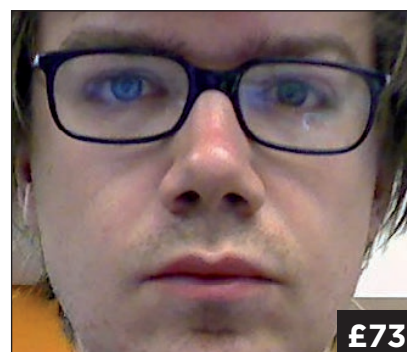
MICROSOFT
LifeCam VX-6000



CREATIVE
Live! Cam Optia AF



LOGITECH
QuickCam Ultra



BUDGET BUY

MANUFACTURER	SWEEX	MSI	SWEEX	GENIUS	GENIUS	PHILIPS
Model	Nightvision Chatcam	StarCam CLiP	Foldable Hi-Def 1.3M Trackcam USB 2.0	Look 1320	Look 320S	SPC315NC
Rating	★	★★★★★	★★	★★	★★★	★★
Sensor resolution	320x240	640x480	640x480	1,280x960	640x480	320x240
Frames per second	30fps	30fps	30fps	30fps	30fps	30fps
Interface	USB	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB
FEATURES						
Buttons	Snapshot	Snapshot	None	Snapshot	Snapshot	Snapshot, launch software
Microphone	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated	Headset	External	Headset
Motorised	No	No	No	No	No	No
Motion tracking	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Infrared illumination	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Software included	AmCap	MSI My Guard Live	AmCap	DDPlayCam, AmCap	DDPlayCam, AmCap	Philips VLounge
Extras included	None	None	None	None	Travel bag	None
BUYING INFORMATION						
Price including VAT	£9	£15	£16	£20	£26	£26
Supplier	www.rlsupplies.co.uk	www.ebuyer.com	www.rlsupplies.co.uk	www.tekheads.co.uk	www.tekcomputersuk.com	http://uk.insight.com
Details	www.sweex.com	www.msi.com.tw	www.sweex.com	www.geniusnet.co.uk	www.geniusnet.co.uk	www.consumer.philips.com
Part code	WC004	S1B-0403030-S59	WC053	32200182101	32200067101	SPC315NC/00

BEST BUY

MANUFACTURER	CREATIVE	GENIUS	LOGITECH	MICROSOFT	CREATIVE	LOGITECH
Model	Live! Cam Optia	Look 313 Media	Quickcam for Notebooks Deluxe	LifeCam VX-6000	Live! Cam Optia AF	QuickCam Ultra Vision
Rating	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★	★★★★	★★★
Sensor resolution	640x480	640x480	640x480	1,280x960	1,600x1,200	1,280x960
Frames per second	30fps	30fps	30fps	Not stated	30fps	30fps
Interface	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed	USB Hi-Speed
FEATURES						
Buttons	None	Snapshot	Snapshot	MSN Live Messenger chat	None	Snapshot, launch software
Microphone	Headset	Microphone socket	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated	Integrated
Motorised	No	No	No	No	No	No
Motion tracking	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Infrared illumination	No	No	No	No	No	No
Software included	Creative Live! Cam Center, Creative Live! Cam Manager, Creative Live! Cam Console, Creative Photo Manager, Creative Photo Calendar, Muvee autoProducer	DDPlayCam, AmCap	Logitech QuickCam	LifeCam Dashboard	Creative Live! Cam Center, Creative Live! Cam Manager, Creative Live! Cam Console, Creative Photo Manager, Creative Photo Calendar, Muvee autoProducer	Logitech QuickCam
Extras included	Travel bag	None	Travel bag	None	Travel bag	None
BUYING INFORMATION						
Price including VAT	£30	£30	£40	£49	£53	£73
Supplier	www.scan.co.uk	www.microdirect.co.uk	www.comet.co.uk	www.dabs.com	www.scan.co.uk	www.expansys.com
Details	www.creative.com	www.geniusnet.co.uk	www.logitech.com	www.microsoft.co.uk	www.creative.com	www.logitech.com
Part code	73VF027000003	32200074101	961400-0914	68C-00002	73VF028000003	961471-0510

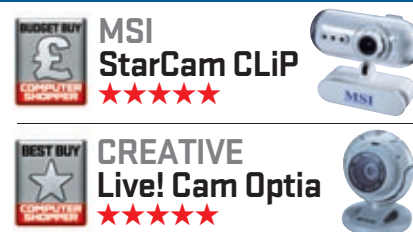
Labs verdict Webcams

With the exception of the cheapest Sweex camera, all the webcams in this group provide acceptable image quality for internet video calls. Some produce particularly good images, though, and others include notably good software. Overall, three webcams stand out as particularly good value.

If you want a simple, inexpensive webcam for online chatting, we recommend MSI's StarCam CLiP. It provides good image quality, usable security software and even a moderately effective nightvision mode. At just £15 it's a bargain and our Budget Buy.

If you want the best possible image quality, on the other hand, you'll have to spend significantly more. Logitech's Quickcam Ultra Vision produces excellent pictures, but it's ridiculously expensive at £73. Creative's Live! Cam Optia AF is almost as good, and at £53 it's significantly cheaper than the Logitech, but it's still expensive.

For those of you who want to do a little more with your webcam without spending a fortune, we recommend Creative's cheaper Live! Cam Optia instead. It produces decent images and includes an excellent suite of



software that will help you to get the most from your snapshots and video clips. At £30 it's our Best Buy. **CS**